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A NEW HYPOTHESIS ON THE CREATION OF THE HOHLE FELS "VENUS" FIGURINE

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Female "Venus" figurines are well known from 24-29 ky (Gravettian), from France to Siberia. They are typically characterised by large breasts and belly, suggesting pregnancy. It seems likely that they were designed to be held in the hand, and may have served as amulets to protect against the dangers of childbirth.

In 2008 a female figurine was excavated from Hohle Fels Cave, southwest Germany. Calibrated radiocarbon dating of the charcoal-rich material around the figurine yielded dates ranging from 36 000 to 40 000 calendar years ago. This figurine is therefore the oldest known piece of figurative "art", predating the Gravettian Venus figurines by thousands of years. It is also quite different anatomically, suggesting that it does not represent an early stage in the same tradition and did not have the same purpose or symbolism.

The Hohle Fels figurine (figure) has large protruding breasts and an enlarged vulva; her legs are widely separated and there is a well-worn loop carved in place of her head, suggesting that it was strung and suspended as a pendant. Nicholas Conard wrote in his original description: "There can be no doubt that the depiction of oversized breasts, accentuated buttocks and genitalia results from the deliberate exaggeration of the sexual features of the figurine." In the accompanying News and Views commentary, Paul Mellars wrote: "The figure is explicitly – and blatantly – that of a woman, with an exaggeration of sexual characteristics... that by twentyfirst-century standards could be seen as bordering on the pornographic." He also refers to "its explicitly, almost aggressively, sexual nature." Mellars' descriptions betray a sense of disgust, which is not appropriate, and imply that a grossly enlarged vulva and breasts are overtly erotic.

I propose a different hypothesis on the origin of this carving, which I see as the somatosensory self-portrait of a woman who has recently given birth. The changes that a mother's body undergoes at birth are fundamentally different from any of the other experiences related to the female body, since they are not only radical but sudden, in contrast to the gradual and incremental changes that one experiences during puberty and pregnancy. From this viewpoint, the portrait of the carver's body is not based primarily, if at all, on what she sees, but on perceptions interpreted by her somato-sensory cortex. Her breasts are engorged with milk: their gradual enlargement during pregnancy has not prepared her for the sudden shock and discomfort of lactiferous engorgement. They feel unfamiliarly tight and enormous, hence their exaggerated size and raised position. Her belly, having enlarged gradually during pregnancy and having contained an active fetus, is suddenly empty. She is aware of the loss from it of the child she was carrying. Although her belly is still somewhat swollen, the skin is now far too big, and wrinkled, hence the transverse striations firmly engraved into the ivory.

Tears of the perineal membrane, always painful and potentially functionally damaging, are the most common complication of natural childbirth, especially for a first delivery. It may be that the trauma of the birth has been worsened by a tear. The discomfort of her (unseen) vulva is portrayed as an enlargement of this area: although visually unrealistic it is entirely consistent with this view of the figurine as the externalised expression of somatosensory information-processing. The wide separation of the legs, so different from the Gravettian figurines, is also consistent with this interpretation, suggesting a strong sense of discomfort emanating from the area between them. In contrast, the back, being unaffected by parturition and its aftermath, is smooth apart from a simple demarcation of the waist. Similarly, the legs below the knees are irrelevant and so are not represented. Arms, although short, are present, including well-defined fingers: these have explored the unfamiliar body.

This explanation is also consistent with the absence of a head. If the portrait is based on post-partum sensations from the body, the head is irrelevant. The creation of a loop where the head would have been, and the fact that it has been polished by wear, suggests that the woman who carved this sensory portrait made it for herself. She could have worn it as a pendant on a thong around her own neck for a long time afterwards, perhaps as a way of coming to terms with a stillbirth. The postpartum bodily changes are the same after a stillbirth as after a live birth, but the emotional trauma of stillbirth can motivate the bereaved mother to do something creative to express her profound sense of loss. Furthermore, the absence of the demands of maternal care and the need to recuperate physically would provide the necessary time for the many hours of carving required for creating this piece. Two features of the breasts suggest this as a possible explanation: the circumferential lines suggest a sensation of tightness unrelieved by suckling, and the nipples are poorly defined. The interpretation of this figurine as primarily a somatosensory self-portrait suggests that the original impulse to create figurative art may not have arisen exclusively from a desire to portray visual experiences.



Three views of the Hohle Fels figurine
(from N. Conard, *Nature*, 459, 2009, pp. 248-252, with permission).





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